

UCLA

Policy Briefs

Title

Connecting the Dots... Ridership Changes, Underlying Causes, and Strategies for Pasadena Transit

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62f5z49q>

Author

Peraza, Jesus E.

Publication Date

2019-07-01

Connecting the Dots... Ridership Changes, Underlying Causes, and Strategies for Pasadena Transit

Jesus E. Peraza, MURP

UNIVERSITY
OF
CALIFORNIA

Issue

Over the past decade, while public transit operators in the Los Angeles region started experiencing steep declines in ridership, Pasadena Transit was adding riders. More recently, however, Pasadena Transit's ridership plateaued and then started to decrease. The Transit Division of the City of Pasadena Department of Transportation is therefore interested in understanding what may be causing transit ridership to decline in its jurisdiction, what are the circumstances driving these changes, and what these causes and circumstances suggest for ways to make the system more attractive to riders.

Over the past 12 years, systemwide ridership peaked at 1.82 million rides in 2009 and experienced a low of 1.39 million rides during 2013. Then, between 2017 and 2018, ridership declined by 5 percent to 1.54 million riders (this most recent patronage dip largely motivated the present study). Healthy ridership levels make transit service sustainable, which allows for enhancement and expansion of the service. The importance of transit pivots on providing (a) an array of travel choices to serve different needs and (b) a lifeline service to low-income people and other groups who rely heavily on it because they are not able, physically or financially, to drive.

Research Findings

- Increased vehicle ownership and use were discredited as factors, since Pasadena residents, unlike their LA County counterparts, are collectively disposing of private vehicles.
- The escalation of telecommuting is a likely contributor; given that the less that people physically travel to work, the less likely they are to ride transit.
- The aging of Pasadena's population could be an influential factor as well, since younger populations are more likely to ride transit than seniors and middle-aged people.
- Homelessness in Pasadena — which rose 28 percent from 2016 to 2018 — might be incentivizing riders to seek other, more private, travel modes that spare them from sharing space with homeless people.
- Displacement of frequent transit users appears to be the major driver of patronage decrease. Rent-burdened residents who used to frequently ride Pasadena Transit get pushed out by a heavy influx of wealthy people, who — at best — ride transit sporadically.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

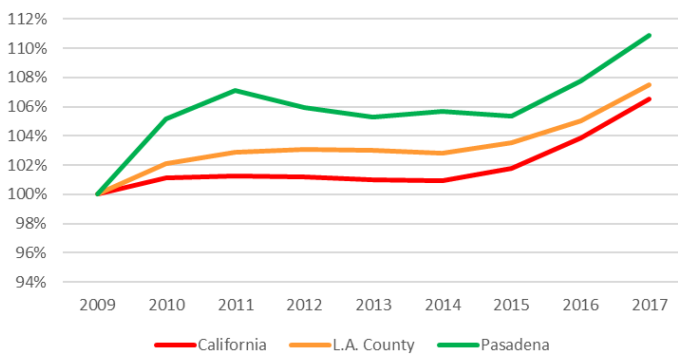
- Competition from other travel modes is a likely driver of Pasadena's transit ridership changes. However, instead of private vehicles taking over the market, as is the case in Los Angeles County, telework and ride-hail are rising in popularity in Pasadena.
- The main factors identified include the influx of wealthier people into Pasadena and rising rents, which might have pushed out lower-income residents, who most likely were frequent transit users.
- Most of the factors identified here as potential drivers of ridership decline in Pasadena are outside of the local transit agency's control, but Pasadena Transit still has some tools at its disposal.
- This report recommends targeted marketing and awareness campaigns to identify unlikely riders, travelers deterred from transit by the presence of homeless individuals, and residents who now travel differently due to increased housing costs.

Approach

This project contrasted local bus ridership trends with possible causal factors: other transit agencies' patronage, service provided by Pasadena Transit, vehicle ownership among Pasadena residents, means of transportation used to get to work, demographic changes (race and age), economic indicators (poverty, unemployment, and income), homelessness, and housing-market conditions (rent and the percentage of income Pasadena households pay on rent).

The data were obtained from Pasadena Transit, LA Metro, Foothill Transit, and the U.S. Census Bureau. Trends were generally analyzed from 2009 to 2018, with a special emphasis on 2013 to 2018, when Pasadena Transit experienced continued growth before peaking in 2017.

Figure: Median gross rent (inflation-adjusted to 2017), indexed to 2009.
Data source: U.S. Census Bureau.



Conclusions

- Pasadena increasingly houses groups that usually ride transit infrequently: telecommuters, Asian residents, seniors, and wealthy newcomers. This report suggests conducting targeted surveys to understand the travel needs of these groups and, thereby, serve them better.
- Pasadena Transit could leverage awareness to humanize homelessness, which might aid in dispelling the perception of homeless people as a threat and allow transit riders to feel more comfortable around them.
- Evidence points towards growing rent burdens as the main factor weakening ridership. This report suggests building a database of rent-burdened households and their locations, then, evaluate their access to the local bus network and devise ways to better serve their needs.

For More Information

Peraza, J. (2019). *Connecting the dots... ridership changes, underlying causes, and strategies for Pasadena transit* (Masters capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0sc0v4pt>

Research presented in this policy brief was made possible through funding received by the University of California Institute of Transportation Studies (UC ITS) from the State of California via the Public Transportation Account and the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (Senate Bill 1). The UC ITS is a network of faculty, research and administrative staff, and students dedicated to advancing the state of the art in transportation engineering, planning, and policy for the people of California. Established by the Legislature in 1947, UC ITS has branches at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, and UCLA.

